

Teacher investigated for Disney movie says politics drove her to resign

[Jonathan Edwards](#)

Jenna Barbee said she wanted to give students a “brain break” during standardized testing earlier this month by showing them a movie. Barbee, a fifth-grade teacher at Winding Waters K-8 school in Brooksville, Fla., chose Disney’s “Strange World” because the film about journeying to a mysterious underground land related to recent science lessons about the environment.

But [“Strange World”](#) is also Disney’s first movie featuring an openly gay character, a fact that led a school board member to report Barbee to state officials, the teacher told the Hernando County School Board at its May 9 meeting. The Florida Department of Education is now investigating whether Barbee broke the state’s law forbidding public school teachers from talking about gender and sexual orientation with students, she said in [a TikTok video](#), which has been viewed more than 5 million times in three days.

“This is the public education system, where students from all backgrounds, cultures and religions are welcomed and should be celebrated and represented. I am not and never would indoctrinate anyone to follow my beliefs,” she said at the start of the 6½-minute video. “I will, however, always be a safe person to come to that spreads the message of kindness, positivity and compassion for everyone.”

Barbee [told CNN](#) she had already submitted her resignation from the school a week before showing the movie. She said she did so because of “politics and the fear of not being able to be who you are” in Florida public schools.

Cassie Palelis, a Florida Department of Education spokesperson, said state law prohibits officials from talking about internal investigations or confirming whether they exist. Karen Jordan, a spokesperson for the Hernando County School District, said officials there are conducting their own investigation into what happened but declined to comment further.

[An explosion of culture war laws is changing schools. Here’s how.](#)

Barbee’s situation has become the most recent flash point in the national debate over how students learn. Over the past three academic years, lawmakers in nearly every state have proposed [hundreds of laws](#) designed to limit what teachers can say about race, racism and American history; change how they can teach on gender identity, sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ issues; and prioritize “parental rights” in children’s schooling.

Florida has been among the states to pass the most laws in the conservative-led fight. In March 2022, Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) signed into law the [Parental Rights in Education Law](#), dubbed the “don’t say gay” bill by critics, which restricted teachers in kindergarten through

third grade from talking about gender and sexual orientation. Last month, the state Board of Education [expanded those restrictions](#), forbidding such discussions throughout all grades in K-12 public schools.

Barbee told CNN she didn't know the restrictions had been expanded when, earlier this month, fifth-graders at Winding Waters spent the morning taking standardized tests. In the afternoon, the students who had finished their tests gathered in Barbee's classroom, while those still testing went to another room.

Barbee chose to let the students in her classroom watch "Strange World," a 2022 PG-rated animated film with the voices of Jake Gyllenhaal, Gabrielle Union, Dennis Quaid and Lucy Liu. Although Barbee said she wasn't focused on it at the time, the movie introduces viewers to 16-year-old Ethan Clade, voiced by [Jaboukie Young-White](#) and described by [Variety](#) as "a biracial, openly gay teenager who gets completely tongue-tied when he's near his crush."

When she spoke to board members at their May 9 meeting, Barbee said that the film focuses on Ethan's sexual orientation for about 2½ minutes of its 107-minute run time, none of which contains "sexualization or inappropriate content."

Still, Shannon Rodriguez, a school board member whose 10-year-old daughter watched the film in Barbee's class, said she found it inappropriate and reported the incident to Winding Waters's principal. Barbee said Rodriguez also reported her to the Department of Education, sparking a state-level investigation.

Rodriguez, who took office in November after [campaigning against teaching about race and gender identity](#), did not respond to a request for comment from The Post.

Barbee scolded Rodriguez at last week's board meeting, accusing her of abusing her power by using a harmless situation to promote a political agenda. Barbee called for Rodriguez to be removed from the board.

Rodriguez said during the meeting that showing the film at school was inappropriate and forced her to have a conversation with her daughter about sexuality prematurely. "As a parent, it's my job to teach my child about the birds and the bees and relationships, and for me to decide at what age I want to embark on those conversations," Rodriguez said.

"It is not a teacher's job to impose their beliefs upon a child: religious, sexual orientation, gender identity — any of the above," she said. "But allowing movies such as this assist teachers in opening a door ... for conversations that have no place in our classrooms."

Barbee told CNN she wasn't trying to "indoctrinate" her students, who hardly noticed the character's sexuality until the issue blew up. But, she added, her students are already talking about issues of gender and sexuality that go "way beyond" the movie she showed, and she's the one who tells them to pump the brakes.

“This door that she’s talking about, it’s been open,” Barbee told the news network. “These are common conversations that I have to tell my students, ‘Woah there. We’re getting a little too much here.’”